

## Postcolonial approaches to development

Noxolo, Patricia

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## Postcolonial approaches to development

**Dr Pat Noxolo, University of Birmingham. Email: [p.e.p.noxolo@bham.ac.uk](mailto:p.e.p.noxolo@bham.ac.uk)**

Postcolonial approaches to development can be understood as an ongoing negotiation with the developmental imagination in relation to the global, i.e. a negotiation with the main foci, constructs and disciplinary centres of international development. The relationship is a two-way negotiation, because reactions to development have just as much influenced and helped to shape postcolonial approaches as vice versa: the relationship has been one of mutual influence and critique. After all, what development and postcolonial theory have very much in common is their shared engagement with the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world, and their shared insistence that the richest and most powerful engage with them too, with a shared goal of changing global inequalities. Nonetheless there are tensions between postcolonial theory and development theory. These surround their contrasting attitudes to the means by and the extent to which not just global *poverty* but also global *inequality* should be addressed. It is perhaps fair to say that, where development theory is structured around eradicating global *poverty* (albeit with a close critical concern with how poverty works through national, regional and global inequalities) postcolonial theory is more closely structured around eradicating global *inequality* (with a politicised anger about the diverse forms of poverty and discrimination that global inequality perpetuates, at intimate as well as at global scales). These tensions are neatly summed up in Christine Sylvester's statement of their contrasting views of the poorest and most vulnerable: "development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating" (Sylvester 1999, p. 703). After a short introduction to postcolonial theory, this essay will run through some of the development practices, constructs, and disciplinary centres with which postcolonial theory has been engaging.

Other contributors to this volume introduce development theories (see ), but the figure of the subaltern forms a convenient stepping off point from which to introduce postcolonial theory as a body of work. Postcolonial theory is an interdisciplinary set of critiques of inequality in the global system. It varies from discipline to discipline in terms of its basic approaches, but is marked by an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic political agenda. Because it emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, postcolonial theory was concerned with Eurocentrism as a legacy of European colonialism, and has been concerned with insisting on a greater voice for those marginalised outside the West - or with 'the rest' as Stuart Hall memorably put it (Hall 1992). However, changes in geopolitics in recent years (most notably the end of the Cold War and the rise of Asian and other powers) have laid bare the underlying concern with inequality itself as a legacy of a range of colonial conditions – in other words the geographical locations of centres and margins have been revealed as less fixed than the continued existence of centres and margins in the global system (Raghuram, Noxolo and Madge 2014).

The subaltern emerges as, by definition, the unheeded other (Said 1995), no matter where s/he emerges from, and postcolonial theory has been concerned with how the subaltern can be heard, let alone heeded, in a global system that is rooted in imperialism (Spivak 1988). The genocides, misrepresentations and silences of colonial archives, practices and processes were inevitably distorting (Power, Mohan and Mercer 2006, Slater. 2004) – no counter-historical authentic voice of the untouched indigenous other is now available (Spivak 1988). In the post-imperial era this 'white

noise' (Cox 2006) is only compounded by the "epistemic violence" (Spivak 1988, p. 281) and obscuring biases of development frameworks and agendas (Kapoor 2008). So postcolonial theory is not just concerned with increasing the participation of the subaltern in global wealth – in Sylvester's (1999) terms, one could see a will to participation in wealth as development theory's concern that the subaltern eats. Postcolonial theory is more concerned with interrogating the terms of that participation – what must the subaltern become in order to participate in global wealth? What space is there in the systems that reproduce global wealth for radically different cultures and perspectives to co-exist and to emerge as equally valued? In Sylvester's (Sylvester 1999) terms (themselves borrowed from Spivak 1988), how can the global system really listen to the subaltern? Ultimately, postcolonial theory is marked by an underlying appreciation that only by rigorously interrogating the terms and conditions of global wealth and wealth-making – its roots and complicity in colonial oppression, and its continued reproduction through exploitation, inequality and the silencing of cultural difference – can any lasting form of global equality be established.

### **Postcolonial approaches to development foci**

Postcolonial theory has repeatedly engaged in shifting the focus of the development imagination from a range of agents of change and forms of agency, to a range of subalterns and forms of subalternity. If we focus on what is often thought of as the development era, i.e. the years immediately following the second world war, we can see that the immediate post-independence focus on the developmental state, though clearly initiating a postcolonial moment of independent rule, was dominated by developmental visions of transformation from traditional societies to (post)modernity (Cardoso 1982). When the vision began to go awry, when the geopolitical centres did not shift, the vision was reversed, so that newly-independent states were forced to recognise their continued dependence on state actors elsewhere (Manzo 1991).

It was in this context that postcolonial approaches examined the individuals that made up the state, not just as policymakers, but as exemplifying a peculiarly hybrid form of subalternity: they were European-educated postcolonial elites who could not assume but needed to actively forge relationships with 'the people' before they could begin to engage with and represent them (Fanon 1967). Many writers who have become foundational to postcolonial approaches addressed the contradictions in the position of these elites, and made this emblematic of the hybridity of what might be understood as the postcolonial condition (James 1989, James 1992). V. S. Naipaul (2012 (1967)), for example, critiqued post-independence elites as 'mimic men', tragically trained and enculturated into a doomed yearning for western knowledge and culture, but never being fully integrated either into western culture or into the culture of the places that they were governing and representing. This fractured form of subalternity (in which elites were relatively powerful but still unable to find voice) can be understood as the cultural condition for the emergence of a cadre that Achille Mbembe (2001, p. 42) calls 'postcolonial potentates', ruling through kinship connections and offers of sinecures in ineffective bureaucracies. These top-heavy systems arguably left a governance deficit when the state was shrunk due to structural adjustment in the 1980s (Hewitt 2000).

In an extension of their own arguments, postcolonial theorists have often been subject to the same fractured subalternity, and postcolonial theory itself has been dismissed by some as merely a sign that "Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe" (Dirlik 1994, p. 329). In other words, postcolonial theory has been criticised as the intellectual musings of the elite cosmopolitan,

or, to borrow a phrase from a similar critique of cosmopolitanism, as “the class consciousness of frequent travellers” (Calhoun, quoted in Ley 2004, p. 160). Key theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Trinh Minh-Ha are portrayed as academics whose global South or diasporic allegiances are in tension with their global North education and roles, making them restless in the world because they have no genuine constituency in it (see for example Hall 1996).

This conflation of the theory with the identity of the theorist is an interesting source of tension in postcolonial theory, one that is linked very directly to the source of fracturing of this particular form of subalternity. Many postcolonial theorists share national or ethnic identity with people in the global South, whilst at the same time being radically different from the poorest and most vulnerable due to their elite status (money, often place of residence, and most obviously education). Whilst postcolonial theory is an academic, often rather esoteric, set of theories and approaches, particularly in terms of language and concepts, at the same time postcolonial theory insists on voice for the most marginalised subalterns, many of whom have little access to literacy, let alone to academic theory. For many development theorists postcolonial theory is almost perversely “obfuscating” (McEwan 2003, p. 346) and inaccessible in its language, making postcolonial theory at best a distraction, at worst an irrelevance in the context of continued insecurity of food, accommodation and basic needs. For postcolonial theorists however, the difficult language and concepts of postcolonial theory arise not just from cosmopolitan theorists struggling to express their *own* subalternity: it arises from a struggle to acknowledge the *condition* of subalternity that is present in global relationships. Difficulty of expression comes from the need to express difference or at least to make space for something radically other to express itself, whilst having for the moment only mainstream language and concepts to work with (Noxolo and Prezioso 2012). This is an important point for postcolonial approaches to development: where development has traditionally been action-oriented, focused on initiating and advancing processes of change (albeit often with a critical awareness of the destruction that change can bring), postcolonial approaches to development are often more stubbornly reflective, focused on identifying what is omitted, what is lost, what is left unsaid or what cannot be said (because the frameworks and languages make it impossible) in development processes and relationships. In other words postcolonial approaches are committed to acknowledging the presence of subalternity in development (Raghuram et al. 2014).

This constant reflection in order to acknowledge subalternity can be seen more intensely in postcolonial approaches to another focus of development that emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, i.e. a focus on the developmental roles of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin 2008). Postcolonial approaches can be said to have again shifted the focus from NGOs’ agency as developers to the reproduction of subalternity that their actions facilitate. This shift has been executed in two ways. First postcolonial approaches have focused on the colonial antecedents and continuities of large development organisations (Bell 2002), including intergovernmental agencies (Power 2009), and of NGO workers and developmental civil servants (Kothari 2005). These approaches explore the historical legacies that help to explain *why* the subaltern is still unheard in development: inequality was effectively institutionalised within development organisations and practices as it emerged out of colonial institutions and practices.

Second, postcolonial approaches have focused on the power relationships between NGOs and communities, the subtle coercion and power relations inherent in forms of participation (Cooke and

Kothari 2001), NGO managerialism (Dar and Cooke 2008), and even development volunteering (Smith and Laurie 2011, Noxolo 2011b). In other words, these approaches explore the processes by which inequality is often reproduced in contemporary development practices: even developers' mechanisms for listening to subalterns can reproduce silence.

### **Postcolonial approaches to development constructs**

In addition to its foci, postcolonial theory has repeatedly engaged development theory around its constructs. There has been a particularly strong critique of the temporalities and spatialities of development. In terms of temporality, most heavily-critiqued has been notions of teleology (Young). In common with other post- theories (postmodernism, postdevelopment etc), postcolonialism has been sceptical of versions of history that move in one direction, setting out only one version of the future. Development has been the sine qua non of this kind of theory, its teleology set out in the very word 'development'. This word has a biological root, and produces an image of nations developing in particular directions, as plants and animals do (from smaller to bigger, or from immature to mature) (Esteva 1992). Although the development of biological organisms is cyclical rather than linear, involving the process of decay and death as well as the process of maturation (Cowen and Shenton 1995), many argued that developmentalism, particularly in the form of modernisation, suggested a single direction for the development of post-independent countries (Escobar 1995). This route ran from an unproductive traditionalism to a productive modernity, from the diversity of non-western cultural forms (characterised by superstition and static social systems) to a more homogeneous westernised global system (characterised by scientific rationalism and a focus on human improvement). In this view of development as progress, colonialism's ignominies and inequalities have been a necessary route to an inevitable future.

As a consequence of this temporal critique, postcolonial theorists have questioned both spaces at the ends of this teleology – both the globalised future and the pristine past. Many development researchers have demonstrated that globalisation is highly uneven and not necessarily experienced by all as an improvement (Sparke 2003, Sousa Santos 2003). Postcolonial theorists have in addition pushed for a recognition that the global is enormously diverse, and that there is a wide range of different modernities that co-exist under globalisation (Bhabha 1994). In fact, it is the unequal relationships between these different modernities that characterises the global, and that can be understood as shaping some of the development issues faced by people in the global South (Mbembe 2001). For example some of the longstanding wars and civil conflicts in central Africa can be understood as a feature of the movements of resources and ideologies across the uneven terrain of the world, so that for example the minerals and resources consumed in richer countries are paid for in blood by those caught in enclaves that are impossible to govern because of the competing demands both of those within and of those outside national borders (Mbembe 2003, Sidaway 2003).

However, if progress is not inevitable and the future is no longer a comforting dream, there is no possibility of refuge in a pristine past in which might be found all the answers. Postdevelopment theorists have often been accused of romanticism in relation to a pre-colonial indigenous past, and there has been a wide range of movements – such as negritude or antillanite that have focused on revalidating the pre-colonial past as a response to its undervaluing due to colonialism and modernisation theories (Mudimbe 1988). However it is core to postcolonial theory that pre-colonial societies were also immensely complex: not only is it impossible to return to the pre-colonial past,

we cannot expect to find paradise if we do. In fact postcolonial theorists have argued that it is the specificity of the hybridity of nations – the irresolvable knitting together or syncretism between pre-colonial and colonial legacies – that is core to the particularity of each of their modernities (Mbembe 2003). As a consequence, postcolonial theories emphasise, not a developed future, but an entangled, irreducibly diverse present (Raghuram et al. 2014).

### **Postcolonial approaches to development's disciplinary centres**

Finally, postcolonial approaches to development have tended to shift the disciplinary centre of development away from political economy to cultural approaches, or in geographical terms, to shift the centre of development geography away from political and economic geographies towards cultural geographies. This re-orientation (effectively from the social science leanings of human geography to its humanities leanings) is not surprising given that postcolonial theory has emerged largely via comparative literature and via the ethnographically oriented histories of the Subaltern Studies group (Guha 1982). Most obviously this routing has entailed a methodological shift in terms of approaches to development.

Methodologically, there is a move away from grand universal theories (such as modernisation or dependency theories) towards an emphasis on multiple viewpoints and a range of located perspectives and values. This is true throughout development, but in postcolonial approaches in particular it is an attention to the *minutiae of relationship* – to the particular located understandings of the values and meanings of everyday activities and interactions – that postcolonial theory looks, in its emphasis on diversity and equality. Theory about global culture and its diversity therefore *arises from* multiple localities, rather than being *applied to* multiple localities (Raghuram and Madge 2006). However, in distinction to similar methodological moves, such as grounded theory, there is also a deeply politicised emphasis on *decentering* the European and westernised centres of theory production that have characterised development, so that localities in the global South are not simply case studies for western theory but are themselves recognised as spaces in which theories are produced that arise out of their own complex postcolonial realities (Chakrabarty 2000).

This aspiration towards a decentering of western theories in favour of building theory out of the postcolonial everyday leads to an extreme sensitivity to the difficulty of seeing past one's own perspectives to arrive at the minutiae of others'. This sensitivity also arises from the fact that postcolonial theorists may aspire to decentering, but most are in fact either located in western institutions or heavily influenced by western-centred theory, either through their training or through the postcolonial formations of the institutions in which they were trained (Dirlik 1994, Madge, Raghuram and Noxolo 2008). At the very least this manifests as an inability to see that which one has been trained not to see – historically in development the economic role of women was one such unseen phenomenon (Boserup 1970), but contemporary blindspots can be a range of non-economic or non-marketable resources. For example, sacred knowledges or spaces often only become visible when they stand in the way of a development goal (for example when they affect health-seeking behaviours, such as condom use) or when they can be co-opted for development (such as the increasing roles of faith communities in social care and in devising discourses that justify wealth acquisition) (Comaroff 2009, Olson 2008).

This anxiety about not being able to see that which one has been trained not to see has led to a deeper and deeper ethnographic interrogation of development practices and of subalternity. On an

individual level, it has led to a deeper self-interrogation on the part of the postcolonial researcher, a 'hyper-reflexivity' in an ongoing effort to 'unlearn' the blinkers of western-centred training (Kapoor 2004). This hyper-reflexivity is an increasing interrogation of the terms and conditions of development research – for what purposes are we researching, who will our work benefit, why these questions, why these frameworks, why now? Ultimately postcolonial theory's search for a decentering tends towards a fundamental question: what gives the development researcher the right to do this research at all? The answer to this question may not be the demise of development research (there are many careers invested in it and of course many good intentions and good effects relating to it), but having to justify rather than assume the right to research is at least a starting point towards shifting the unequal power relations that often underpin it (Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

On the level of development as a set of practices and institutions this hyper-reflexivity has led to a range of ethnographic work that interrogates development itself, rather than its traditional research 'objects'. This can be participant observation of development practitioners in the 'field' as it were (Crewe and Harrison 1998), but also of development practitioners in development forums (Mawdsley, Savage and Kim 2014, Trotz and Mullings 2013), of development practitioners across the length of their careers (Harriss 2005), as well as tracing the highly contingent development of development ideas from development forum to development forum (Scoones 2009).

Perhaps more counter-intuitively, postcolonial approaches' hyper-sensitivity to the difficulty of seeing past one's own perspective has also led towards textual and discursive research methods, the interrogation of books, films, social media (Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock 2008), as well as of development archives and reports (Slater and Bell 2002, Noxolo 2011a), as a means of understanding the minutiae of everyday relationships in development. The routing of postcolonial theory through history and literature is an obvious historical reason for an emphasis on novels and archives: these are the loci out of which postcolonial theory has historically been crafted, and their continued importance testifies to the importance of the location of theoretical production (Spivak 2003). The specificity of the foundation of theory affects the formation of that theory, and this is true for postcolonial theory's methodological approaches, just as it is true for its overall political project of decentering theory.

However, I mention textual approaches in the context of a postcolonial sensitivity to the difficulty of seeing past one's own perspectives. This is because methods of close reading are used in postcolonial approaches as a means of seeing the world otherwise, effectively of retraining the eye in order to see others in less blinkered ways (Spivak 2003). Particularly important in the reading of western-centred reports or colonial archival material has been processes of seeing that which has been marginalised within the text, but that continues to make its presence felt. This can be understood as 'reading along the grain' (Stoler 2009), an attention to the logics and epistemologies that guide the writing of the text, such that certain elements are mentioned whilst others can only be mentioned tangentially if at all. One can think of this, at the smallest scale, in terms of the logics of writing itself, so that the postcolonial researcher effectively reads a development text like a writer, with a sense that the process of writing entails a number of choices and rules that in turn necessitate marginalisations or absences, even where the writer does not explicitly intend them. As Toni Morrison (Morrison 1993, p. 17) has put it, in relation to the marginal presence or invisibility of black characters in mainstream North American writing:

I began to rely on my knowledge of how books get written, how language arrives; my sense of how and why writers abandon or take on certain aspects of their project. I began to rely on my understanding of what the linguistic struggle requires of writers and what they make of the surprise that is the inevitable concomitant of the act of creation.

Alternatively one can think of this type of reading at a range of larger scales, in terms of interrogating the global, national and local conditions that make a particular text possible. This approach routes through Said's contrapuntal reading (Said 1994), which most famously read Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* as a text that has as an unspoken condition of its existence the dependence of the English country house on the Caribbean slave plantation, not only in terms of revenues but also in terms of assumptions of hierarchy that related to differently gendered and racialised bodies in both places. This kind of contrapuntal reading allows development analyses that look across international boundaries to critique and question key development dynamics that are *co-produced* through relationships between global South and global North (Noxolo and Featherstone 2014). These include conflicts and insecurities, which many have noted are emblematic of global inter-relationships (Sidaway 2003, Duffield 2007), and the presence of which can be traced both through development texts and through postcolonial literature (Noxolo 2014).

## Conclusions

This chapter has worked towards a notion of postcolonial and development theories as locked in negotiation one with another. Postcolonial theory has responded to changes in development theory, arguing repeatedly for shifts in the foci, constructs and disciplinary centres of development theory. So if we return to Christine Sylvester's succinct summary with which I began this chapter: "development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating" (Sylvester 1999, p. 703) we can say there is still some truth in this. Development is concerned with the pressing materialities with which the most vulnerable live, whether or not people can find enough to eat this very day. Postcolonial approaches are stubbornly critical of processes of subalternity, and remain insistent on questions of equality and voice.

However it is also true to say that development theories are strongly characterised by critical tensions and contestations (Frank, Willis), many of which arise explicitly from the challenges of postcolonial theory. At the same time postcolonial approaches are increasingly addressing questions of methodology to improve the quality of listening in development research (Raghuram and Madge 2006), with an increasing awareness of the materiality of everyday living in vulnerable situations. So postcolonial theory and development theory are both concerned with poverty and inequality: they negotiate to fundamentally address the latter, whilst not ignoring the reality of the former.



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